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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 007113

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: A PRE-ELECTIONS PRIMER: PARTY PRIMARIES, POLLS AND PRECEDENCE

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (GARBLED TEXT)

1. Summary: Less than ninety days ahead of Israel's general elections, the political landscape the three major parties will maneuver through is clear. December 29 marks the passage of the statutory 21 days since publication of the presidential order to dissolve the 16th Knesset, a formality that effectively ends the possibility that 61 MKs could form an alternative government. Kadima, Labor and Likud, the three largest parties are now officially led by Ariel Sharon, Amir Peretz, and Binyamin Netanyahu respectively. All three have yet to establish their lists for the March 28th elections to the Knesset. The method for doing so varies by party, but the timeframe is taking shape, with Likud party primaries scheduled for January 12 and Labor primaries on January 17. PM Sharon is likely to wait until February 8, the deadline for submission of party lists to the Central Elections Committee. End Summary.

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KADIMA PLAYS THE FIELD  
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2. As founder of a breakaway faction from Likud, Ariel Sharon enjoys the one-time luxury of shaping his Kadima party free of the restraints of party primaries. The faction has yet to form its institutions or devise a system of internal elections, so PM Sharon and a small group of advisors will pick the team as he sees fit. His base is the 13 members of Knesset he took from Likud, as many as 5 members from other factions, former Likud MK Tzachi Hanegbi, and former Likud member (not an MK) Shaul Mofaz. The polls are predicting Kadima could capture as many as 39 Knesset seats in the elections. That means Kadima could be the only major party that wins sufficient seats to introduce new faces into a legislature recently criticized by Knesset Speaker Reuvin Rivlin as containing "some members who were not worthy of their mandate."

3. Recently returned from Washington, former Shin Bet Chief Avi Dichter officially announced December 27 that he would join Kadima, a move that many pundits had predicted. Another prominent newcomer is Professor Uriel Reichman, a founding father of the Shinui party who is considered a major asset in light of his key role in advocating a constitution for Israel and definition of desired Israeli borders with a Palestinian state. A Kadima campaign staffer told us that he "could not say" just when the faction would close its list -- a statement which suggests Kadima could be campaigning to recruit new members all the way to the February 8 deadline for submission of party lists to the Central Elections Committee. As yet, Labor members Peres, Itzik and Ramon have not formally resigned from their party or joined the Kadima list but the February deadline will force them to make their move official. (Note: The Labor MKs who wish to join Kadima face possible attempts by Labor itself to have them disqualified from running on any party list on the grounds that they have split from their faction but did not resign their Knesset seats, in accordance with the Basic Law. End Note.)

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LABOR IGNITES ISRAELI POLITICS -- ONLY TO FEEL THE HEAT  
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4. More than one veteran pundit views the surprise victory of Amir Peretz over Shimon Peres in the Labor leadership primary last November as the catalyst which finally ruptured Likud and brought Kadima into the political light of day. The euphoria in Labor was short-lived, however, and the party is now battling major uncertainty as to just how it can improve its standings in the next Knesset, given the declared intention of three of its senior members, Peres, Ramon and Itzik to join Kadima. Labor prides itself that it is the only major party of which all registered members are entitled to elect the party list. That vote is scheduled for January 17 amidst dire forecasts by the latest opinion polls that Labor will drop from its current 21 seats to a mere 17. Compounding the struggle to maintain a winning posture, Labor is also embroiled in internal wrangling over precedence among its members. Amir Peretz's clear preference for new names, such as former Shin Bet (ISA) Chief Ami Ayalon and the President of Ben-Gurion University, Avishay Braverman, is at odds with the expectations of Labor's veteran Knesset members who demand precedence. This

tension could well produce unexpected results in the January primaries.

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LIKUD LICKS ITS WOUNDS AND COMES TO HEEL  
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15. The December 19 single-round victory of former prime minister and finance minister Binyamin Netanyahu in the Likud leadership primary has given the Likud party some bounce in the polls, the latest of which gives Likud 16 or 17 seats as compared with an earlier December forecast of only 12 seats in general elections. In the aftermath of the leadership primary, Netanyahu is making every effort to heal his battered party, but its depleted membership may not remain compliant and cohesive for long. To satisfy those in the party who are still vulnerable to overtures from Kadima, the Likud Central Committee voted December 26 to give FM Silvan Shalom the coveted number two slot on the Likud list. Netanyahu is also trying to exclude the right-wing fringe leader, Moshe Feiglin, who finished third on December 19, in an effort to burnish Likud's appeal as a mainstream party. Netanyahu reportedly plans to introduce an amendment to the Likud Charter aimed at banning candidates with criminal records from running in the primaries. (Feiglin was convicted of incitement in 1997 and served prison time.) The Likud party primaries, in which some three thousand Central Committee members will choose the party list, are now scheduled for January 12. Ahead of them, a Ma'ariv poll, conducted among some 400 central committee members, produced a party list remarkable only for its lack of new faces and devoid of any surprises in regard to precedence.

CRETZ